

### Black Girlhood In The Nineteenth Century

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## Review

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**Wright, Nazera Sadiq** *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*. University of Illinois Press, \$28.00 ISBN 9780252082047

Re-examining the Literature: African American Girls and the Question of Racial Progress in the Nineteenth Century

Literary scholar Nazera Sadiq Wright's aptly titled and powerfully written work *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* explores depictions of African American girls found within American newspapers, novels, and conduct manuals during one of the most racially turbulent periods in the nation's history. Drawing on a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction sources, Wright chronicles the development of black girls in literature from the onset of the country's first black newspaper in 1827 through the early years of the twentieth century. As this meticulously researched book demonstrates, African American communities underwent tremendous change during this time, witnessing the abolition of slavery, the hope of Reconstruction, as well as the devastation wreaked on black neighborhoods through de facto discrimination and institution of Jim Crow laws. In response, black men and women across the United States sought diverse strategies for challenging the effects of racism and asserting their claims to citizenship. African American writers and editors, in particular, the author contends, frequently discussed and debated such strategies for racial progress on the page, a technique that was not lost upon an increasingly literate black public. Expertly weaving literary and historical analysis in her review of prominent as well as lesser-known nineteenth century texts, Wright argues that black girls bore a special responsibility in the literature of the day, becoming a mode through which the African American literary elite could present and negotiate their hopes and anxieties about, as well as strategies for, the continued advancement of the race. While Wright's deep archival research insures a compelling discussion of diverse works written throughout the nineteenth century, her analysis shines most brightly in her chapters on antebellum black girlhood, the emergence of Gertrude Bustill Mossell's advice column published

in the *New York Freeman*, as well as depictions of African American girls that appeared in black conduct manuals in the early decades of the American century.

Throughout this work and in her chapters on antebellum girlhood, in particular, Wright distinguishes between texts written by male and female authors, asserting that while the former often presented black girls in their idealized forms, African American female authors grappled more forthrightly with the harsh realities that dominated the lives of black girls during this period. These difficult circumstances, the violence of slavery and the threat of sexual assault, Wright asserts, curtailed the childhood of many African American girls, forcing them to transition very quickly from youthful innocence to a state of “premature knowing” (61) in order to protect themselves. Centering her discussion on the works of Maria W. Stewart, Harriet Wilson, and Harriet Jacobs, Wright successfully demonstrates the manner in which the young protagonists of such texts embraced imperfect behaviors and the power of their individual will in ways that privileged survival over Victorian standards of female propriety. In both Stewart’s “The First Stage of Life” and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Wright suggests, the central figures Letitia and Frado only become fully realized when they make the decision to advocate on their own behalf. For Letitia, this exercise of will emanates through her decision to pursue a religious education, while for Frado, it is best illustrated in her unwillingness to sustain further beatings from her employer, Mrs. Bellmont. Perhaps most compelling is Wright’s discussion of the protagonist Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs’s autobiographical work, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which Brent becomes privy to the sexual victimization of black women as a result of the predations of her master, Mr. Flint. Rather than capitulate to her master’s desires, Brent uses her “premature knowing” to engage in a relationship with a neighboring white man, hoping this sexual union will protect her from the advances of Mr. Flint. In doing so, Wright contends, Brent asserts her will and reclaims the effects of her truncated childhood, utilizing its hard lessons to insure the survival of both herself and her family. Although not written for expressly didactic purposes, these works do much to illustrate the power of alternative models of African American girlhood, ones in which, Wright asserts, black girls were encouraged to take their futures, and by extension, the future of the race into their own hands.

Wright makes a similar argument in her discussion of Gertrude Bustill Mossell’s advice column “Our Women’s Department” which appeared in *New York Freeman* in the latter years of the 1880s. Although the period following the

Civil War brought many political as well as literary transformations to the black community, Wright asserts that Mossell, like her predecessors, continued to address the daily concerns and challenges of life for black girls in the post-Reconstruction era. Wright's focus on the emphasis Mossell placed on the working lives of African American girls is deserving of special mention. Within this chapter, the author argues that Mossell, rather than espousing the values of feminine domesticity, an elusive goal for many black communities struggling with the effects of a discriminatory labor market, instead celebrated the economic contributions of black girls to their families, offering advice and counsel for navigating the difficulties of employment. Notably, the stress Mossell places on the importance of thrift and economical housekeeping, Wright illustrates, reveals the columnist's attention to the growing industrial economy and increased opportunities for girls' spending that threatened the financial stability of black homes. Additionally, Mossell also provided guidance for black girls engaged in domestic service which, as Wright indicates, served as one of the largest employment sectors for African American girls and women in the nineteenth century. While Wright notes Mossell's attention to the significance of financial security, she also demonstrates the writer's insistence that black girls be treated with dignity and respect in their places of employment. Citing an article published in January 1886, Wright points to Mossell's admonition of white employers, indicating that all Americans shudder at the thought of exploitative servitude and that domestic workers deserve to be treated "more as if they are human beings and less like brutes" (106). Through Mossell's rebuke of employers, Wright suggests that the columnist was also tacitly signaling to black girls the kinds of treatment they should and should not tolerate both within their working lives, as well in their daily engagement with the larger public sphere. As such, Wright's analysis reveals that Mossell's advice column sought to provide a roadmap for African American progress by tailoring her message to black girls, the youngest and seemingly most vulnerable of these communities, but whose promise and fortitude, columnist assured, would dictate the trajectory of the race.

In her final chapter, Wright explores the prominence of black conduct manuals in the early twentieth century, convincingly arguing that such texts placed a particular emphasis on the role that African American girls played in the campaign for racial uplift, a role that writers feared could either support or upend black progress. Wright also notes that such manuals marked a distinctive shift in the ways black girlhood was discussed and defined during this period, as girls were expected by black conduct writers to behave in ways that emphasized

their domesticity, modesty, and submissiveness. Focusing primarily on Silas X. Floyd's popular manual, *Floyd's Flowers*, which was reprinted numerous times throughout the Progressive era, Wright asserts that black intellectuals created such manuals in response to the increased racial discrimination that proliferated throughout the United States in the decades following Reconstruction. Within conduct manuals, Wright argues, black girls were often reduced to character types that would either challenge or confirm the racist stereotypes that plagued African American communities. Such character types included: "The Dutiful Girl," "The Don't Care Girl," and "The Loud Girl." The expectations held for "The Dutiful Girl," the paragon of respectable black girlhood in *Floyd's Flowers*, Wright notes, portrays young women, both literally and visually, as educated, modestly dressed, and domestically demur. This emphasis on a submissive feminine ideal, while designed to protect black girls and the larger black community from charges of impropriety, sexual or otherwise, Wright suggests, also deprived black girls of their right to be fully human and to, in the throes of adolescence, test the bounds of acceptable behavior and dress. In making this connection to adolescence clear, Wright implicitly recalls the experiences of black girls in antebellum texts who, by virtue of their "premature knowing" were also deprived of a full childhood, and thrust into the realities, behaviors, and expectations of adulthood far too soon. Together, Wright's attention to and deep analysis of these turn-of-the-century conduct manuals illustrates the centrality of responsible and respectable girlhood to the racial uplift ideology advocated by black intellectuals, even as such depictions often curtailed the individual experiences of real black girls.

Nazera Sadiq Wright's artful study of African American girls in the nineteenth century makes a significant contribution to a growing field of scholarship. While historians such as Erica Ball and Michele Mitchell have also written compellingly on the roles of gender, literature, and the black press in the quest for full citizenship and racial uplift during this period, Wright expands upon this already formidable body of research, complicating our examinations of race, sex, and class, with the additional consideration of age. While historical scholars may bristle at Wright's contention that these nineteenth-century depictions hold significant implications for the way we discuss black girlhood in our own time, her message, in its most basic sense, holds true: that language and literature was and continues to be immensely powerful. As such, Nazera Sadiq Wright's *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* is an impressive achievement and will serve as important reading for literary and historical scholars, as well as

anyone interested in the significant role of African American girls in the tumultuous decades that brought the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and the unfulfilled promises of Reconstruction.

*Marissa A. Jenrich completed her master's degree in January 2017 and will be pursuing her Ph.D. in History at the University of California, Los Angeles in the fall. Her master's thesis entitled To "Treat Her as a Woman": African American Women and Respectability in New York, 1860-1890 investigates women's demonstrations of industry, purity, and self-reliance in the postbellum period, positing that respectability politics, while reaching its apex in the early twentieth century, also manifested as resistance strategy for black communities of the Victorian era.*